

Columbia graduate students voice opposition to sell-out contract as strike deadline at NYU draws near

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On Wednesday at 9 a.m., the vote on a sell-out contract that had been negotiated by the United Auto Workers (UAW) and Columbia University behind the backs of the rank-and-file officially began. The Graduate Workers of Columbia (GWC), which are affiliated with the UAW, are urging graduate students to vote “yes,” threatening that a “no” vote could lead to an even worse contract, and promising that they would receive a miserable \$1,000 summer payment if the contract was approved. This one-time payment would amount to less than the average monthly rent for a room in Manhattan.

Paid for, at least in part, by federal COVID-19 relief funding, it is a laughable sum considering the de facto pay cut graduate workers would have to take under the proposed contract. The three-year contract also includes a no-strike clause.

The blatant attempt to financially bribe graduate students into voting “yes” on a contract that means more, not less, financial hardship for them has infuriated many who see the contract as a slap in the face. The sell-out contract comes after a month-long strike in which they courageously fought for, among other things, a living wage and decent health care. Anger about the union is running high and students across the university are mobilizing for a no vote.

One graduate student told the WSWs: “The tentative agreement fails to bring the most vulnerable of us up to a livable wage or improve material working conditions for all of us and is therefore unacceptable.”

He denounced the union, stating: “The BC [bargaining committee] has not reflected the will of the rank-and-file who have been on the picket line and in the general body meetings. COVID austerity is

nonsense. In our specific case, it was a narrative that the BC submitted to. It therefore pushed off the substantial raises until the last year of the contract, such that now A) most of our striking workers wouldn’t reap their benefits and B) the overall cost of the contract for Columbia is wildly reduced.

“I see a no-vote and reorganizing as the best way forward. I think that voting down this contract and negotiating through the summer will give the best opportunity to understand the role of this struggle within the context of the struggle at NYU and higher education generally, and therefore where our power lies as workers.”

Another graduate worker told the WSWs, “The UAW & BC do not care about the rank and file. They know their objective—get any contract ratified ASAP so [that the] UAW can get their 2 percent of dues.” He expressed a deep desire to continue the fight outside the confines of the UAW: “I am not giving up this fight. Not at all. But I will not give the BC any more deference. They are illegitimate. I intend to ignore them and determine a strategy to overcome this horrible tentative agreement.”

In a city where 630,000 workers have lost their jobs just over the past year, and over 1.6 million out of a population of 8 million rely on food stamps, the union has made no attempt to connect the struggle of graduate students to the broader social conditions and struggles facing the working class. Instead, everything was done to isolate the strike and limit it to the university campus, with the effect of wearing down the graduate students.

As the union moved to shut down the strike, the GWC-UAW focused ever more on promoting identity

politics, especially the #MeToo campaign, in a deliberate attempt to divert from the class issues. At its rallies and on its Twitter page, the union has begun to highlight allegations of sexual abuse on campus as the main basis for the need for third-party arbitration.

Amidst widespread anger and opposition to the union sell-out, a critical role is being played by the so-called reform caucus within the GWC-UAW, the Academic Workers for a Democratic Union (AWDU). While the three reform caucus members on the BC voted “no,” they have done everything to prevent a break by graduate students from the union, claiming that graduate students could still advance their interests within this rotten organization.

At NYU, the bargaining committee of the GSOC-UAW, which is completely dominated by the reform caucus of the AWDU, is preparing to play the exact same role as the BC at Columbia University. For months, the GSOC-UAW has delayed the strike so that it would not coincide with the strike at Columbia. At the same time, it has made one concession after another to NYU before the strike has even begun.

At a membership meeting last Thursday, rank-and-file members of GSOC clearly opposed the further lowering of key demands, which graduate students were asked to vote on. The options presented to them already included a significant lowering of the initial demands. In other words, they could only vote on how much, not on whether or not, the demands would be lowered.

In virtually all cases—wages, health care, child care and tuition waivers for master’s degree students—the majority of the students voted for the least possible lowering of the demand. Of those present, 62 percent voted against a lowering of the demand to \$32/hour, preferring a demand of \$35/hour. Several students expressed opposition to any further lowering of the wage demand.

Yet there are indications that the AWDU-controlled GSOC-UAW is preparing to lower the wage demand regardless to \$32/hour ahead of the last scheduled bargaining session with NYU. This would mean a lowering from the initial demand of \$48/hour by a whole third, under conditions where NYU has signaled that it would not make any concessions on this issue, in particular. The university first tried to introduce a two-tier wage system and then offered an insulting \$1/hour

raise.

Moreover, in the meeting last Thursday, BC representatives indicated that they were ready to go even lower than that, to just \$26/hour. The union is no doubt counting on the sell-out at Columbia, where the UAW is trying to ram through a paycut, as the basis for presenting another sell-out at NYU as a “major win.” The only demands that GSOC has not budged on at all concern the promotion of identity politics.

One major consideration in the union’s dramatic lowering of demands is that it is still hoping that it can call off a strike at the last minute, using whatever meager counterproposal NYU makes as a pretext.

With only days left before the April 26 strike deadline at NYU, graduate workers and students must draw far-reaching lessons from the experience at Columbia. Contrary to the hopes held by student workers, the UAW has been brought into academia not to improve the conditions of workers, but in order to play the same role that it has played for decades in the auto industry: working on behalf of the corporate interests that dominate the universities, the union’s role is to control the workforce, and ram through sell-out contracts. The only increase in pay that the union is ready to fight over is one that directly goes to increasing the revenue stream from union dues that serves to enrich the union officials.

A successful struggle by graduate students for their interests requires an organizational and political break with the trade unions. Instead of appealing to the ruling class, whose representatives control the university administration, and the unions, graduate students need to base their struggle on a socialist perspective and an orientation to the working class.



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